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Indonesia: More people killed - when will the military learn lessons of the past?

The new era of reform and political tolerance promised by the new Habibie government has clearly not filtered down to military commanders and their troops in the field, Amnesty International said today. Reports of shootings in Irian Jaya bring to at least 21 the number of people in Indonesia and East Timor killed or wounded by the Indonesian Armed Forces in the past 10 days

Despite an apology by a local military commander for the shooting of two peaceful protesters during a pro-independence demonstration at a university in Irian Jaya's capital city Jayapura on 3 July, the military are reported to have opened fire on another pro-independence demonstration just two days later -- this time on the small island of Baik just off the northern coast of Irian Jaya.

"The use of excessive and lethal force has been a feature of the Indonesian Armed Forces' response to both peaceful and armed opposition over the last three decades,"Amnesty International said. "These latest killings and injuries raise concerns over how slowly the military is responding to the promise of change made by the country's new leadership".

Reports received by Amnesty International from Biak refer to at least six people being injured by members of the armed forces as they stood watching pro-independence demonstrators raising the West Papuan flag on Sunday evening. At least one person is also believed to have been arrested.

Two days earlier, on 3 July, a law student, Steven Suripatti was shot in the head by the military during a pro-independence demonstration at a university in Jayapura. He is now in a critical condition in hospital. The demonstration is believed to have begun peacefully but turned violent after an Indonesian intelligence officer was spotted in the crowd and badly beaten. There are some reports that he may have died of his injuries. A school girl was also shot although she is not believed to have been involved in the demonstration.

At least 41 people are reported to have been arrested in Jayapura, including two priests. Amnesty International is concerned, that individuals in custody, far from the media spotlight of the nation's capital, are at risk of ill-treatment in custody.

Reports from the remote town of Sorong in the north west of Irian Jaya indicate that one person was killed and another five people are suffering from gun shot wounds sustained when the military tried to break up a peaceful pro-independence demonstration outside the local parliament on 2 July.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
INTERNATIONAL SECRETARIAT
1 Easton Street, London WC1X 8DJ, United Kingdom
Tel: Int. Code: (44) (171) 413 5500. UK Code: (0171) 413 5500. Fax: Int. Code: (44) (171) 956 1157. UK Code: (0171) 956 1157.
E-Mail: amnestyis@amnesty.org Web: http://www.amnesty.org
Telegrams: Amnesty London WC1 Telex: 28502 AMNSTY G

"For years the security forces have got away with murder. The events of the last week appear to indicate that, despite hopeful statements about respect for human rights and accountability from the government, the killings are set to continue," Amnesty International said.

"Now is the moment for the Indonesian authorities to prove its commitment to reform," the organization urged. "Not only must it initiate immediate and thorough investigations into the recent shootings and bring those responsible to justice, but it must also issue strict orders to the military to restrain them from using excessive force to control demonstrations."

BACKGROUND

The shootings in Irian Jaya are not isolated incidents but follow three recent killings in East Timor. Two East Timorese are believed to have been unlawfully killed by the security forces during a visit to East Timor by three European Union Ambassadors in late June.

On 27 June, one man was believed to have been shot dead by the military in Manatuto, East Timor, during a confrontation between pro-independence groups and supporters of integration with Indonesia. Another man was shot dead and five other people were wounded in Baucau on 29 June when the security forces opened fire on a crowd of people after a vehicle carrying plain clothed military personnel which was following the European Union Ambassadors was attacked by some in the crowd.

On 16 June, Herman Dasdores Soares, a 21 year old East Timorese man was shot dead by the military in Obrato, some 60 kilometres east of Dili, after he was suspected of stealing wood. A soldier is now on trial for his death.

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